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July 12, 2018

How to Get Gigs in Schools

NOTE: We recently had a two-hour webinar on performing in schools where we covered what schools want, how to market, and more. The replay video is available for purchase at the [Performing in Schools: How to Get Gigs](#)

I'll never forget my first performance for a group of school kids.

It was January 1995, and at the time I was what you would call a "gigging musician."

My normal routine back then involved rolling out of bed sometime between 9:00am and Noon (depending on the day), teaching a few guitar students during the day, and then playing out that night in a bar where the band was

Or 11:30pm.

(Famously, [the bars in Buffalo NY](#) where I live stay open until 4am, so everything tends to start a little later)

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I had we've got this trio that goes into schools doing Erie Canal music (*what?*) and we just lost our third. Needless to say, I had no idea what Erie Canal music was, and even less of a clue about performing.

Me: "Um...sure. What time's the gig?"

Him: "8:30am. You'll be home by 10."

Me: (long pause.....)

Did he say 8:30am, as in *8:30 in the morning*?

How That First School Gig Went

So I boned up on the material quick -- there were about seven songs to learn, and some speaking (*What? I need to actually **say things** to the audience?*)

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no idea what was about to happen.

We arrived at about 7:30am and loaded into that brightly-lit Catholic School gymnasium, and I just had

We [set up the PA system](#), rehearsed a few things, I took some time to go over my speaking parts in my head.

And then, the kids — all 250 of them — began filing in to that large, boomy, uninviting room.

Big kids, little kids, **LOUD kids**.

I think it must have been every grade level from Kindergarten to 8th. Quite a span of ages.

They took their seats on the floor in a somewhat orderly fashion as the principal made her way to the

Off we went....

That first show was definitely a blur. The songs were new to me, the comedy and schtick and script I had learned a whole lot real quick about how NOT to talk to a room full of kids (i.e. don't do what I did

But when I came out on the other side of that performance, I was left with a very definite feeling.

I LOVED IT. I absolutely loved it.

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The kids had so much fun. They were wide open and eager for more. They laughed. They moved c

And the best part?

They didn't need a single beer before they warmed up to us.

I pretty much decided then and there that I wanted to be doing a whole lot more of this, and because it was also a very logical career move to start pursuing 45-minute gigs that pay really well and don

So here's what I did...

It's pretty amazing to think about what a turning point that gig was for me.

From that moment forward, I made it my goal to figure out how to work in schools as much as possible, doing exactly that.

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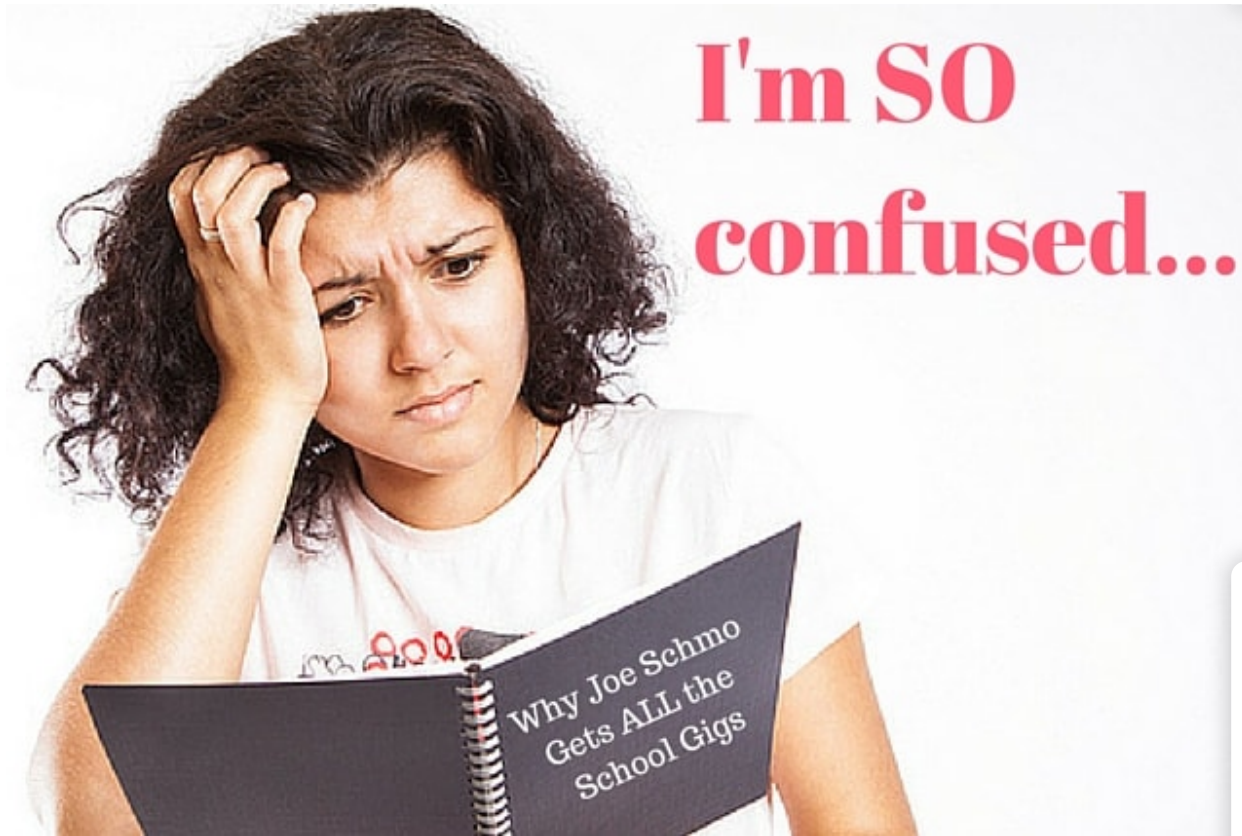


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The hours are hard to beat, the work feels really meaningful, and I've been able to make a great liv

I hope that some of what I've learned along the way will be helpful to you.

(You might also be interested in the article "[How to Get Gigs in Libraries.](#)")

How to Work a LITTLE in Schools

Do what you do and spread the word

I think there's room for just about every performer in every genre to get the *occasional* school gig you do.

Sometimes you'll find a music teacher, for instance, or an administrator, who feels strongly about **the mandated school curriculum.**

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There are plenty of educators who believe in this approach, and of course, all the research backs up the [importance of the arts](#) to a well-rounded and sane society (to say nothing of all the [academic benefits of an arts-rich curriculum](#)).

The problem is that it's becoming ever more difficult for schools to justify losing the sacred instruction time each teacher needs in order to get through their curriculum and prepare students for the multitude of tests and assessments they're faced with.

Sadly, the days of "art for art's sake" seem to be mostly behind us in K-12 education, at least for now.

However, that shouldn't stop you from [making connections with the appropriate people](#) within your regional schools and letting them know about what you do.

They may have an event or a "tie-in" that you weren't even aware of that makes you the perfect fit for a booking.

PRO TIP

If there's any kind of label or authentic category you can put on what you do, you might consider adding that to your materials. It will give schools (and libraries, and other venues) something to "latch onto" when considering you for a booking. You call yourselves an "American String Quartet," or a "Pan-European String Quartet?" Maybe "International Festival" in the coming months...

How to Work a BIT MORE in Schools

Do you already perform for kids?

If you're somebody who already provides fun and engaging performances for kids outside of education, you can work a bit more in schools.

Whether you're a juggler, storyteller, musician, dancer, or three-wheeled-unicyclist, your show might be a great fit for school events:

- *Fun Day*
- *End of the Year Picnic*
- *Friday afternoon before school breaks*
- *Evening Family Events*
- *Celebrations for a job well done (Reading incentive programs, etc.)*

For these occasions, the school may be looking for something "fun" with no specific educational tie-in. You might be any number of different people – principal, PTA/PTO/Parent Organization, one specific teacher, or a group of parents.

Best to ask.

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How to Work EVEN MORE in Schools

It's not about you, it's about them!

The more time I spent in schools, the more I began to notice what it was that *they* were interested in.

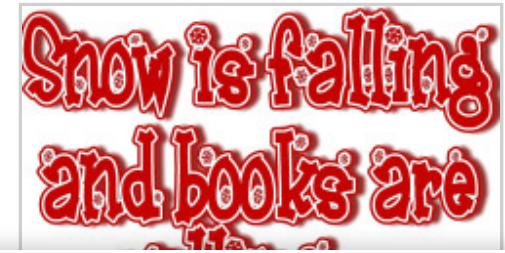
On my way from the auditorium stage to the main office or the loading dock, I'd see signs on the wall that looked like some of these:



Character Education



Healthy Eating



There are school-wide initiatives that most schools take on every year, and these can last from a few days (diversity or multicultural month) to an entire school year (character education, healthy choices, etc.).



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The Hill Brothers back in “the day”

Remember the performing group I mentioned at the beginning of the article?

Well, they’re still around. They’re called [The Hill Brothers](#), and over my twelve-year tenure with them, we wrote several new shows to address some of these themes head-on.

It was actually a blast trying to figure out how to make these topics interesting, humorous, fun and musical for kids, and in the process, our bookings went through the roof!

The group did **over 300 shows** during one very memorable (and tiring) school year alone.

The demand for such programs has trailed off perhaps a bit since then, from what I can tell (I have moved into other subject areas myself.)

However, artists who have created programs around these topics are still getting booked regularly.

Why?

Because they’re offering something that speaks directly to the needs of the school.

How to Work a LOT in Schools (this is what I do most...)

Integrate with the grade-level curriculum

I surveyed 700 elementary school educators recently about the role of the arts in their classroom teaching.

Granted, these were 700 teachers who had registered their classes for [a live online concert I was giving](#), so I can’t take their answers as a general feeling for the arts.

Still, their answers were really interesting.

Q1: *Do the arts help make learning fun and relevant for your students?*

- Yes – 96%
- No – 3%
- Not Sure – 1%

Q2: *Would you like to be using more music in your teaching?*

- Yes – 92%
- No – 8%

OK, so far so good! This is very promising.

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But now, here's the big one...

Q3: *What's the #1 thing keeping you from using more arts in your teaching?*

The choices were "Budget," "Time," "Not Sure How To," and "Don't Care To."

What do you think they said?

517 of those 700 teachers (a whopping 74%) gave the same answer:



using more arts in their teaching.

The reality of teaching today

As mention earlier, educators are under a tremendous amount of pressure right now, and have been

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In fact, I can't tell you how many teachers have told me they're warning their own college-aged children to go into any field *except* education.

By and large, educators are pro-arts and would love for their students to be getting more. They understand not only the intrinsic value, but also what the arts do for student engagement, motivation, and processing of information.

They just can't give up the instructional time.

So what do we do?

Here's what we do:

We create performances, workshops, and/or programs that dovetail directly with things they're *already teaching* in the classroom.

This is it.

This is what's enabled me to keep my calendar filled to capacity with really satisfying school bookings each year.

Offer the schools something so valuable to their teaching that they will go out of their way to make

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I've always been interested in history and culture. I'm also a musician.

Through my experiences doing [Erie Canal music](#) in schools with The Hill Brothers, I learned that study local and state history.

Great! What else do they learn about besides the Erie Canal?

By talking to some teacher friends, I was able to get a copy of the old "Scope and Sequence" curriculum from the late 1990's.

A big old xerox of the entire thing.

In that document, I could see exactly what social studies and history topics were being covered at the time. In that study, I could drill down to discover exactly what content the students were charged with learning.

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Here's an excerpt from the modern-day equivalent of that document, now called the [New York State K-8 Social Studies Framework](#), from the 4th grade section:

Students will examine New York State climate and vegetation maps in relation to a New York State physical map, exploring the relationship between physical features and climate.

4.1b New York State can be represented using a political map

Students will create a map of the political features of New York State, including the five most populous cities, as well as their own community.

Students will examine the location of the capital of New York State in relation to their home community using directionality.

Students will use maps of a variety of scales including a map of the United States and the world to identify and locate the country and states that border New York State.

4.2 NATIVE AMERICAN* GROUPS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: Native American groups, chiefly the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) and Algonquian-speaking groups, inhabited the region that became New York. Native American Indians interacted with the environment and developed unique cultures. (Standards: 1, 3, 5; Themes: ID, MOV, GEO, GOV)

4.2a Geographic factors often influenced locations of early settlements. People made use of the resources and the lands around them to meet their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter.

Students will examine the locations of early Native American groups in relation to geographic features, noting how certain physical features are more likely to support settlement and larger populations.

Students will investigate how Native Americans such as the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) and the Algonquian-speaking peoples adapted to and modified their environment to meet their needs and wants.

4.2b Native American groups developed specific patterns of organization and governance to manage their societies.

Students will compare and contrast the patterns of organization and governance of Native American groups such as the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) and Lenape, including matrilineal clan structure, decision-making processes, and record keeping with a focus on local Native American groups.

4.2c Each Native American group developed a unique way of life with a shared set of customs, beliefs, and values.

* For this document, the term "Native American" is used with the understanding it could say "American Indian."

What of the first units the teachers will cover in the fall (4.2) is on the Native Americans who inhabited the region that became New York.

Ding ding ding! I'm really interested in Native American history.

This is where my first curriculum-related program was born. It was going to be *just* for 4th graders to illuminate Haudenosaunee life.

I called the show "[The Native Americans of New York State](#)," which is how the unit was titled in the framework.

PRO TIP

To whatever extent possible, use the exact same language that educators use when they refer to this unit as "The Native Americans of New York State," I called my program the very same thing.

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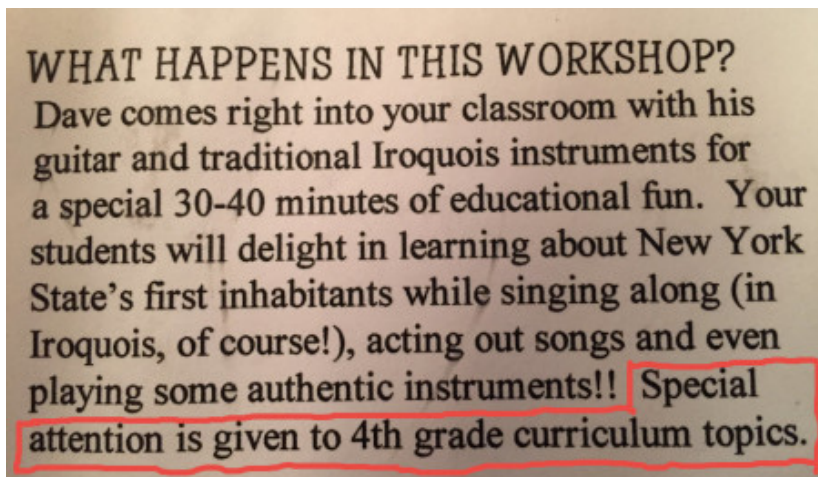
Email address...

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I had a great time investigating traditional Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) music from old ethnographic field recordings, contemporary Iroquois singers and other materials, and boned up on as much Haudenosaunee history as I could **specifically as it related to the aspects of Iroquois life students would be learning about in 4th grade.** (4.2a, 4.2b, 4.2c above.)

Once I got my feet wet, I added [a songwriting component](#) as well.

Here's a section of the original postcard I was sending out to 4th grade teachers to market the program. Notice how the whole thing speaks directly to the teachers, and the last line assures them of its relevance to their work:



Still today when I describe the program (which might look really familiar from section 4.2a in the curriculum document above):

"Topics covered include the Iroquois' use of their surroundings to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing, and the Iroquois to the reservations."

Can you see how irresistible a program like this would be for a teacher? Now they have someone with a degree in music (and a gymnasium...) with an arts-based learning experience *tied directly to what they're teaching.*

Their curriculum + your artform + active participation + rich content + humor + fun = **the very best**

[Teachers know this](#), and they're willing to find the resources to make it happen. (You can help with

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"I HAVE NOT MET A STUDENT YET THAT RAVES ABOUT HOW MUCH THEY
LEARNED FROM A WORKSHEET."

- DR. JENNIFER SKOPECEK, INDIAN CREEK INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL,
TRAFALGAR IN



I hope this has given you lots of food for thought. I'm going to leave you with a few ideas to pursue.

Whether you already perform within a certain genre (French Canadian music, African drumming, etc.), or you're wide open to inspiration in terms of topics, here's what I would do:

1. Perform an internet search for "(Your state) Social Studies curriculum by grade level," or "(Your state) Science curriculum by grade level." Other categories to try would include "Math," "Science," and "Languages other than English."
2. Find some topics in those listings *that you are already passionate about and/or have some experience with*.
3. Spend some time putting a well-researched and thoughtful presentation together. Try it out in front of a small group, get feedback, [get some authentic quotes](#) from those teachers who've seen the program, and then use them in your presentation.

You'll be in business in a big way.

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If you need any final inspiration...

Consider this: my chosen content area (history/social studies) has been the *least* emphasized, the *least* tested, and therefore the *least* important of the major curriculum areas in American schools [for over ten years now](#), as [No Child Left Behind](#), the [STEM movement](#) and [Common Core](#) have successively shifted the focus towards math, science, technology and english language arts.

My work is in an area that could easily be considered the poor little step-cousin of the other subjects right now. Social studies content has even been folded into English Language Arts lessons of late.

And yet, I can't keep up with the demand for my programs.

Why is that?

I think it speaks volumes about this approach: [make yourself so valuable](#) to the schools that they can't help but want to have you.

I'd love your comments below.

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Since leaving a white-collar marketing job in 1992, [Dave Ru](#) in [schools](#), [historical societies and museums](#), [folk music and concert venues](#), [libraries](#), and [online](#) v

Along the way, he's learned a great deal about supporting a family of four as a musician.

The [Educate and Entertain blog](#) provides articles, tips, encouragements, and how-to's for regional full-time living in the arts.

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28 Responses to How to Get Gigs in Schools

1. *Akemi Kinukawa*[July 6, 2018 at 1:04 pm](#)

Hi Dave, so glad to find your helpful website. Would you tell me how long your typical school performance is that works for schools based on your experience? Also how long is the typical school assembly?

Thank you for your help.

[Reply](#)◦ *Dave Ruch*[July 6, 2018 at 5:22 pm](#)

Hi Akemi – I think 45-60 minutes is perfect for a school performance; possibly a bit short for Kindergarten.

[Reply](#)▪ *Akemi Kinukawa*[July 6, 2018 at 5:28 pm](#)

Great, thank you very much!

[Reply](#)2. *zetha Lewis*[July 10, 2017 at 3:51 pm](#)

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Hello Dave

My husband and I are an Americana/Folk Singer Songwriter Duo from Florida and my husband is from a 7 th generation Florida Pioneer family that he has written many songs about . We have wanted to get into schools at this point we do festivals , house concerts , restaurant and such. We do get chikdren up and participating when they are present. Could you give me a few tios on how we should start to get into the school system

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[July 11, 2017 at 7:46 am](#)

Hi Zetha – this sounds like a natural fit to me. If I were you, I'd do a search online for “Florida Schools Curriculum by Grade Level.” From there, find the grades that learn state history (there's probably one grade in elementary schools & one in middle schools and possibly one in high schools) and start reaching out to those teachers to let them know about what you do. As mentioned in the article above, the closer you can tailor your program to the actual standards and curriculum the teachers need to teach, the more work you will get.

If/when you want to take it further, the webinar on creating and booking school shows is packed full of best practices. You can [click here for more info](#).

[Reply](#)

3. *Erin Lichnovsky*

[June 27, 2017 at 9:44 pm](#)

Dave, thank you for this helpful blog post. My husband is a singer / songwriter. He's been w kids., been married 25 years. He also has Cerebral Palsy. He recently started sharing his mus suggested that he look into going to the schools and sharing since he is a special needs dad. be encouraged by his story and music. I looked up local private schools, what would you sug letter in the mail? Any other tips would be most helpful. Thanks!

[Reply](#)

◦ *Dave Ruch*

[June 28, 2017 at 7:24 am](#)

Hi Erin – I think this would be great. Email seems to work well for schools, but letters office on the phone as well, though it might be harder to connect with a teacher or dec main office should get you results though, since you have such a unique offering. Goo

[Reply](#)

▪ *Erin Lichnovsky*

[June 28, 2017 at 9:14 am](#)

Thank you for your quick reply! Yes, I will keep you posted.

[Reply](#)

4. *Lauren*

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[May 2, 2017 at 9:44 pm](#)

Just stumbled across this blog and it's so wonderful! I'm currently an elementary school teacher but have an undergrad degree in theatre and still perform and direct children's theatre in the summers. I'm thinking about leaving full time teaching to pursue something more like you! I love finding creative ways to connect with the curriculum and include music or theatre into my daily classroom routine, but unfortunately it often gets pushed aside because of all the other demands and time restraints I have on a day to day basis. I think doing school assemblies could be a great way for me to still connect and work with kids, but be more creative and actually have time to pursue more artistic and creative endeavors. I still haven't made my final decision yet if I'm going to leave or not, but it is encouraging to know that it is possible to make a living doing something like this if you are willing to put in the time and effort.

I will be looking at many of these articles in the next few weeks! Thanks for putting all this information out there, it's extremely helpful and informative! I really appreciate it!

[Reply](#)

◦ *Lauren*

[May 2, 2017 at 9:46 pm](#)

Also, can you recommend a good post or thread to start off with more of the basics of business/marketing side of things will be my biggest challenge since I have no experience with kids part is the least scary for me!

[Reply](#)

▪ *Dave Ruch*

[May 3, 2017 at 8:58 am](#)

Hey Lauren – great to hear from you. I'm happy to know that you're finding useful time from teachers about time constraints and the inability to get creative with time and we are the ones to fill it!

Posts to help you with the marketing side of things can be found [HERE](#) and also

Also, there are two video trainings available for purchase that might be right up

- 1) [Performing in Schools: How to Create and Book Your Show](#)
- 2) [How to Book Gigs Through Email Marketing](#)

[Reply](#)

5. *Kari Grace*

[November 12, 2016 at 8:05 am](#)

Awesome information!!

[Reply](#)

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- *Dave Ruch*
[November 12, 2016 at 8:58 am](#)

Glad it was helpful Kari.

[Reply](#)

6. *Bill Ceddia*
[August 15, 2016 at 11:12 pm](#)

Hey Dave. As far as schools go, do you target both public and private schools. If you target both, which one have you had the most luck with as far as number of inquiries/bookings?

[Reply](#)

- *Dave Ruch*
[August 16, 2016 at 8:24 am](#)

Hi Bill – I do target both public and private schools. Can't say that I have a strong feeling either way in terms of which is more responsive. Typically (but not always), private schools don't have access to the same kinds of funding to pay for work in private schools.

[Reply](#)

7. *Hope C Lewis*
[May 28, 2016 at 1:49 pm](#)

Thank you, Dave. This how-to post is Dave-tested gold for storytellers and other independent

[Reply](#)

- *Dave Ruch*
[May 30, 2016 at 8:48 am](#)

Thanks for reading and sharing, Hope!

[Reply](#)

8. *Cahir O'Doherty*
[March 21, 2016 at 2:54 pm](#)

That's a very interesting post. I live in Ireland and it might be an avenue to explore. Irish son

[Reply](#)

- *Dave Ruch*
[March 26, 2016 at 7:14 am](#)

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Absolutely, Cahir. I don't know what the funding climate is like in Ireland for school gigs, but as you say, the songs are there and are full of the stories of the people.

[Reply](#)

9. *Larry*

[March 9, 2016 at 9:10 pm](#)

I just discovered your site and feel you may have changed my life. I will be 65 this year. Trying to decide when/if I want to retire from my office "day" job.

I play traditional music and do workshops at festivals, bars, etc. And now I think I would really enjoy this type of gig. May I suggest a future topic? What are the very basic nuts & bolts of starting a business like this? Do you incorporate? How did you get your website up and running? What pitfalls should a beginner look out for?

In any case, thank you for sharing this knowledge. I cannot tell you how excited I am about my future.

[Reply](#)

o *Dave Ruch*

[March 10, 2016 at 8:10 am](#)

Hi Larry – thanks for reading, and for your great suggestion. I'm glad this found you around the topic of getting started and "setting up for success."

[Reply](#)

10. *richard wise*

[January 20, 2016 at 4:57 pm](#)

this is no doubt a terrific type of music gig. i don't need to be a liquor sales facilitator (have d my genres, are relevant to curriculum of any type..will research

[Reply](#)

o *Dave Ruch*

[January 20, 2016 at 5:09 pm](#)

I hear you Richard. Bar gigs have their place, and can be a lot of fun, but they can also

[Reply](#)

o *Dave Ruch*

[January 20, 2016 at 5:10 pm](#)

Also, I think you said you do American Songbook stuff. Have you considered library hours. I'm working on that article right now.

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11. *Ron Kowalewski*

[January 14, 2016 at 1:01 pm](#)

Aligning standards should be easy enough, but how do i help the teachers and schools find funding?

[Reply](#)

o *Dave Ruch*

[January 14, 2016 at 2:01 pm](#)

Hi Ron – important question! More and more, this has become a significant piece of the puzzle. I'll plan on writing a future post about that, but for starters, a few things come to mind:

* in NYS (where I think you are), the BOCES Arts-in-Education CoSer will reimburse participating districts for a percentage of what they spend on arts in ed programs. The way I understand it, that percentage is commensurate with the free-and-reduced lunch ratio for the district. Unfortunately, the large urban districts are not eligible for this.

* NYSCA DEC (Decentralization) Grants for Arts in Education projects – locally admin (who are wonderful people)

* PTAs/PTOs/Field Trip Funds/etc at the school level .

[Reply](#)

o *Jen Swan*

[January 14, 2016 at 2:09 pm](#)

Hi Ron – I am the NYSCA DEC Grant Coordinator for Erie and Niagara Counties (w you about the funding opportunities we have for arts education programs in the school

All the best!!

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12. *Jay Mankita*

[January 4, 2016 at 11:05 am](#)

Thanks for another great post, Dave – having been in this business for 30 years, I can attest t

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Additional Message to Dave

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Have questions or looking for booking information? Call Dave at 716-884-6855, or send him a message below.

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